There Are Softer Oak Trees

Posted originally on the Archive of Our Own at https://archiveofourown.org/works/37384699.

Rating:
General Audiences

Archive Warning:
Creator Chose Not To Use Archive Warnings

Category:
Gen

Fandoms:
Batman - All Media Types, DCU

Relationship:
Tim Drake & Bruce Wayne

Characters:
Tim Drake, Bruce Wayne

Additional Tags:
Damian is mentioned, As is Alfred the Cat, Hurt/Comfort, Injury, Hurt Tim Drake, Bruce Wayne is a Good Parent, Bruce Wayne is So Done, but in a loving way, Crack, Crack Treated Seriously, Light Angst, Fluff and Crack, this has no plot, Character Study, Fluff

Language:
English

Series:
Part 3 of Batfam One-Shots

Collections:
S.T.I.L.L., The Batfamily 2022 Collection

Stats:
Published: 2022-02-26 Words: 5,383 Chapters: 1/1

There Are Softer Oak Trees

by A_Canceled_Stamp

Summary

Okay, fine, no, this hadn’t been part of the plan. This was in all honesty as far away from the plan as one could get.

At least the grass was soft.

Notes

Tim falls out of a tree. That's it, that's the plot.

I'm supposed to be working on my thesis rn what am I doing with my life

Previously titled; The Bark Under My Nails, Reminds Me Of Home

Update: FANART!!!! quotidian-oblivion on Tumblr drew Timmy in the tree and it's just wonderful! Thank you again Quo!

See the end of the work for more notes

Lovely art by quotidian-oblivion!

Okay, fine, *no*, this hadn't been part of the plan. This was in all honesty as far away from the plan as one could possibly get.

Tim took comfort in the fact, however small, that he was at least somewhat sure that his arm wasn't broken. Because if it *had* been he wouldn't have been able to breathe right now.

The arm resting on his stomach throbbed in tandem with his pulse, something that turned into a sharp, stabbing pain when his chest so much as shifted. He sensed that the limb was swollen, but the heat surrounding his elbow as well as the buzzing pain led him to believe that it was nothing more serious than a sprain. Which, sure, was still *bad.* It definitely meant he wouldn't be going on patrol tonight (or anytime soon if Bruce got his way. And Bruce always got his way

when it came to patrolling with an injury) At least he could handle it for now. It was fine.

Tim spat out a piece of bark, panting up at the sky. He would definitely have to wait to catch his breath. And for the pain to go away. And for his head to stop spinning. But after that, he'd be able to get back inside without a hitch.

Probably.

So, just because Tim was a sucker for plans, he established a new one.

Stage one; wait until the pain receded to a satisfactory level where it didn't make his eyes water when he so much as breathed. Stage two; sneak down to the Batcave and patch himself up. Find something that he could make a sling out of. And finally; avoid any contact with Bruce for the upcoming week to hide the injury. Easy-peasy.

To execute stage one, however, he'd have to wait. And to not die of boredom while doing so, he'd have to find a way to entertain himself.

Somehow, that proved to be the more challenging part.

At least the grass was soft.

With a sigh that sent a flash of pain through his arm, he settled for gazing up at the sky, watching the dark clouds billowing in from the south. They formed a large, grey quilt over Gotham, gathering like a dark canvas past the jagged and broken branch protruding from the oak tree.

Tim glared at the remaining stump with as much murder in his mind as he could muster.

It had been quite the fall, to be fair. Tim had only heard the splintering cracks seconds before the branch had all but disappeared underneath him. His stomach had booked a one-way trip to his throat as he fell the fifteen feet. Which turned out to be a too-short drop for him to react and let go of the detached branch. Instead, he'd kept his arm wrapped around it like some kind of maladapted sloth, subsequently landing on both the branch *and* his arm, almost snapping both in half under his own weight.

Sure, it had hurt; both his arm being mushed under him and his head colliding violently with the branch on impact. When he'd rolled onto his back and pulled his arm free, the fading adrenaline leaving him

trembling and his teeth chattering, the pain had started to increase like a crescendo. A headache started to form behind his eyes, but it was nearly silenced by the pain in his arm. Every pulsing throb seemed to give way to an even more intense *boom* that sent sparks of fire through his forearm.

At least he was lucky that there wasn't any cobblestone in this part of the Wayne Garden. Maybe then he *would've* been dealing with a broken arm. Small mercies or all that.

When his glaring did nothing to stop the pain from tormenting his every breath, Tim closed his eyes with a sigh. He saw the grey clouds against his eyelids like a screen burn-in and stifled a groan.

God, he thought, furrowing his brow in concentration, *if you're open for requests;* please *don't let it start raining. It's honestly the least you could do after all you've put me through.*

A raindrop landed on Tim's chin.

Crap.

His phone was still in his pocket. He could feel it pressed snugly against his leg, luckily on his uninjured side. If itturned out it hadn't been completely shattered in the fall, he could just call someone. Or he could just pull himself the hell together and *walk* inside. It wasn't far – a 150-foot journey, tops – to reach the doorway. He could do it.

He moved to sit up, and immediately had to hold his breath to suppress a whimper as the pain increased tenfold, stars dancing before his eyes. The phone was in his hand the moment he could see straight, his breath heavy and an annoyed crease between his eyebrows as he scrolled through his contacts. An unpleasant feeling fizzled to life in his stomach when he realized only one of the family members was actually home at this hour.

For a second, he weighed the humiliation of potentially being found lying on the patch of grass, completely drenched and with a fractured elbow, against the agonizing feat of asking for help. The latter option turned even more disenchanting given the fact that the current predicament had been caused by something he had been forbidden to do in the first place. Which basically meant he'd be getting caught red-handed by the man who not only had set the rule, but who offered him a roof over his head and food on his table. Meaning he would be well within his right to take those privileges away from him.

But...that wasn't entirely true. Because that had been what he'd feared with *Jack*.

It was difficult to convince himself that things were different now, even after so much time had passed. But at the end of the day, they undeniably *were*. It had been proven to him time and time again that he could now trust the person taking care of him, that it wasn't another source of pain outside getting punched in the face when he was dressed as his alternate, crime-fighting self.

His thumb hovered over the call button. He swore and lowered the phone, moving it toward his pocket. Then a raindrop landed on his forehead accompanied by another one just below his eye, and Tim was pressing the dialing phone to his ear within the span of a couple of seconds.

Damn you, Damian, Tim thought, worrying his bottom lip between his teeth. *Demon brother from hell. This is all your fault.*

The line beeped in his ear only twice. Then there was a click, a soft rustle, and a voice spoke up.

"Yes?"

Tim had had a whole speech planned. He'd planned on starting all casual, blaming his call on having a few ideas for the speech Bruce was giving at the gala next month. He'd talk about the weather for a few moments, maybe sneak in a few cleverly concealed compliments to subconsciously get Bruce on his side, and then smoothly transition to the problem at hand.

But then Bruce's voice grumbled in his ear, already sounding tired of Tim's bullshit, and it was like Tim's brain short-circuited. The unplanned words slipped out in a rushed exhale.

"Don't be mad."

He was met with a deafening silence. He wasn't sure if either of them were breathing. Then there was a heavy sigh, and Tim got the mental image of Bruce pinching the bridge of his nose when he spoke.

"What did you do."

Tim cleared his throat and gasped when pain once again reared its head. He gritted his teeth as he tried to remember how to breathe properly. "So…I may or may not have done something stupid."

There was another moment of silence, this one more dangerous than the previous one. It lingered long enough for Tim to fight the urge to squirm, and he was only slightly relieved when Bruce's voice was once again heard. Less so when he noticed the shift in Bruce's tone.

"Timothy Drake-Wayne. What did you do*."*

Tim winced. Shit. This was *bad*.

"It wasn't like I meant for it to happen," Tim said, desperately trying not to sound like he was shifting blame like a child. "This is in no way ideal for *either* of us." He paused, flinching when another raindrop landed on his forehead. Then he sighed in defeat, the tension seeping out of his shoulders. "*Please* don't be mad."

The plea was quiet, more of a murmur than anything else. Tim tried to convince himself that he'd sounded so defeated on purpose.

Bruce either intentionally wanted Tim to suffer or he just really liked utilizing dramatic pauses before he spoke. *"If you would kindly elaborate on what exactly you've done then I can decide whether or not I have a reason to be."* He sounded exasperated, but Tim picked up on a hint of fondness, could imagine the crinkle in the corner of his eyes. Okay, that was good. Tim could work with that.

Still, if Tim had been standing, he was pretty sure he would've been kicking the dirt in shame. Maybe even twirling his fingers together. This was ridiculous. He felt like he was 10 again and in trouble for sneaking out alone in the middle of the night. The only difference was that he was now several years older and wasn't at risk of losing dinner privileges.

It didn't make it any less terrifying.

"So…" he began, and wow, *great start, Drake*. He had to keep his voice light, trying to jolt his arm as little as possible. "Uh…remember that old oak that you mentioned? The one in the south part of the garden?"

When Bruce spoke, after yet *another* deafening silence, the fondness was as good as gone, and his words slow and guarded, shaped like a warning. *"You mean the old,* dying *oak? The one I've* specifically *told you never to go* near?*"*

Tim swallowed. His palms were suddenly very sweaty. "Um. Maybe?"

"Tim."

This time Bruce's voice sounded more alarmed than angry, which somehow only made Tim feel *worse.* There was movement on the other line, and *oh, that's right*. Bruce had a pretty good 180 degree view from his office. He'd probably just have to move to the southern window to spot Tim, and that was…just perfect. On brand, really.

The sound of movement quieted before the was a sudden, sharp intake of breath. *"Oh,* Jesus.*"*

Tim's stomach clenched at the distress present in Bruce's voice, his throat tightening as a sudden wave of fear hit him. He tried to twist his head to get a glimpse of the window, maybe even a glimpse of Bruce, but his neck protested at the unnatural angle.

"No, Bruce, it's— I'm fine." He lifted his hand holding the phone and waved it in the air in an attempt to prove himself right. "See?" He stressed as he pressed the phone back to his ear again. "It's, *ow*, it's fine. I'm— I just hurt my arm."

Bruce didn't seem to hear him. Rapid footfalls and the sound of breathing told Tim he was already moving down the stairs. *"Don't move, okay? I'm on my way."*

"Seriously, there's no need to rush, I'm *fine*," Tim said frantically, mind reeling with how desperately he wanted to smooth over Bruce's worry. He felt almost embarrassed, thinking about how Bruce would react when he finally realized that Tim was, in fact, completely fine. He visualized the tired look he would receive after having caused him to worry over nothing, and he suddenly wanted nothing more than for the ground to swallow him whole.

He continued, the pain in his arm forcing him to keep his voice airy. "I'm honestly more worried about the rain. This sweater is, like, 100 percent wool. It might shrink."

"Tim—" Bruce cut himself off with a sigh, and Tim heard the creak of the front door opening through the line and in real life. It felt strangely foreboding. *"Just stay put."*

Then there was the rapid beeping of the call being terminated, and Tim heaved a sigh, eyes slipping closed as he let his arm fall limply to the ground. Steeling himself for the lecture to come.

The approaching footsteps were muffled against the grass, but loud enough to give Tim time to open his eyes and see the moment Bruce crouched down beside him.

While most people were familiar with various forms of resting bitch faces, Bruce seemed to rather have mastered a resting *stoic* face. His eyebrows were more often than not slightly furrowed, the tight lines in the corners of his mouth always present. It didn't necessarily make him look angry, the way Jack's had. It only made him look…well, *stoic*. Like someone who'd treat everyone with respect yet expect the same in return.

Therefore, the deepened crease between Bruce's eyebrows and the tension surrounding his jaw wasn't something that Tim would consider to be out of the ordinary. It was his *eyes* that made Tim's breath stutter unexpectedly in his chest, his own eyes widening in shock when he saw the turmoil present in the older man's gaze.

Bruce's eyes were traveling over Tim's body even before his hand settled on Tim's shoulder, scanning for visible injuries. When they finally settled on Tim's face, they narrowed, and his lips whitened when he heaved a heavy sigh through his nose that somehow managed to convey a million things in a single moment.

Tim quickly translated the sound to a mix of, *'what have you gotten yourself into?'*, and, *'when are you going to start listening to me?'*. He also picked up on a slight bit of '*what am I going to do with you?'*, but was unsure whether it was supposed to be interpreted as sounding fond or just plain annoyed. Wwhen the flutter of anxiety in his stomach only grew, he discarded that translation entirely.

Bruce, who still hadn't said anything, gripped Tim's chin and began tilting his head from side to side, his eyes continuing to dart across his face. And Tim didn't *do* prolonged silences, especially not when he was feeling guilty. This was honestly a not good, if not *the worst* combination, because when the uncomfortable pressure in his chest became too much to handle, what he finally blurted out was, "Sup."

Bruce immediately met his gaze, eyes narrowing. He released Tim's chin and rested his arm on his bent knee, intently focused on Tim's face.

"Did you hit your head?"

Tim frowned. "Um. Yes?"

"You didn't lose consciousness?"

"No."

“No nausea—”

“*No,* Bruce, I told you, it’s just my arm.”

Bruce looked at him – more like *scowled* at him, the curve of his lips revealing that he wasn’t impressed. “Tim, you’re bleeding.”

Tim blinked. “What? Where?”

Bruce gestured toward his own forehead, an area just under his hairline. “It looks like it’s going to bruise as well,” he added as he leaned forward, grabbing Tim’s chin again to guide his head more to the side, scanning the apparent injury.

“Oh,” Tim mumbled. “What, is it…do you think it’s *bad?* I mean, my head hurts a bit, but I don’t think I am, like, *concussed* or anything.”

Bruce was quiet for a moment, and yeah, there was no way he *wasn’t* doing it to see Tim squirm just a bit. Then he hummed and started gently prodding Tim’s forehead with his fingers. “No, I don’t think you’re concussed either.” He pressed down on a particularly tender part and grimaced sympathetically when Tim winced in pain. “But if you start feeling any differently you need to let me know, okay?”

Tim felt the corner of his lip tug up. “I know how concussions work, B.”

“I know you do.”

“I’m just tired.”

Tim hadn’t expected the honesty in his voice to feel so heavy, the words accompanied by a weary sigh. Bruce’s eyebrows did a weird twitchy thing, his expression cracking just for a moment, and for an instant, he almost looked…*sad*. Tim blinked and the look was gone, quickly morphing into his usual blank features as he shifted forward. “Let’s sit you up.”

Tim hummed in agreement. Then he immediately backtracked with a sharp gasp (*no, wait, B,* wait—) as Bruce slid his fingers just below Tim’s neck and *lifted*.

Tim’s arm was throbbing and his eyes burning by the time he was finally upright, and he panted heavily at the sky, trying to suck the tears back into his eyes. Bruce was rubbing his hand over Tim’s back, a circular sort of motion that was horribly comforting. It would’ve

been so easy for Tim to just lean his head against Bruce's shoulder.

"Son of a *bitch*," Tim gasped instead, glancing down at his traitorous arm with pained distaste.

Bruce tsked, hand moving up to gently squeeze the base of Tim's neck; a silent warning. "Language."

Tim shot Bruce a glare. "I'm allowed to swear when I'm dying," he rasped.

The hand on Tim's neck twitched, a sudden and short-lasting squeeze that made Tim believe it hadn't been fully intentional. There was a confusing mix of emotions that crossed Bruce's features; his mouth crooking into a brief smile as the creases on his forehead deepened. "You're not dying."

Tim was in a bit too much pain to really roll his eyes. He also didn't think his head would've appreciated it. "When I *feel* like I'm dying, then."

"*I* feel like you're being a tad dramatic."

Tim scowled at him, a look that, he realized, only tethered on its authenticity. "Sure. Go ahead and disregard my emotions," he muttered, wishing his injured arm wasn't cradled in his functioning one so that he could've tossed a chunk of grass at him. "It's not like I just went through a traumatic experience."

Bruce leveled him with a *look*, but Tim caught the slight crinkle of his eyes. Tim would've huffed out another laugh if it didn't mean *agony* for his arm.

Bruce's hand abandoned his neck to once again rub up and down Tim's back, and Tim tried not to melt into the touch. As he waited for Tim to catch his breath, the man's eyes drifted to the side where the branch lay, the dried twigs and bark that were strewn around it making it look like the aftermath of a tree massacre.

Bruce craned his neck to look up. "What were you even doing up there?"

Tim grimaced for another reason entirely. "Oh, I just…wanted to enjoy the view?"

Bruce turned to stare at him until Tim finally caved with a sigh, only

after a few seconds. “I was…trying to get Alfred.”

Tim could see the thought process on Bruce’s face as the realization of *which* Alfred Tim was referring to dawned on him. When it did, his eyes widened, and he glanced up again. This time his eyes were searching. “Is he still there?”

“No, that fuck—” Tim’s eyes darted nervously to Bruce before he continued, “uh, he ran off after I fell. At least he’s not in the tree anymore.” Tim paused before huffing out a laugh. “Or under the branch.”

By now, the pain had slowly gone from an overwhelming boom to a throbbing buzz. However, this time, the level that the pain settled on was much more intense than before, no matter how carefully he was cradling his arm to his chest, or how slowly he breathed. The distracting banter had helped though. As well as the warm hand on his back.

Tim was suddenly overwhelmed with gratitude that Bruce was actually *here*. That he wasn’t shouting at him even though he had all the right to do so. That he’d instead opted to keep his voice low and his touches comforting.

And *no*, that wasn’t why Tim was tearing up. His arm just hurt.

“How’s the pain?” Bruce asked quietly.

Tim offered a low grunt, face still scrunched up in a grimace. Whether it was due to the pain or the act of sucking the tears back into his eyeballs he wasn't sure. Probably both. “Hurts.”

Bruce hummed, giving Tim’s neck another squeeze before removing his hand altogether. After getting the reluctant all-clear from Tim, Bruce carefully pulled Tim’s sleeve up and gently started feeling along Tim’s forearm, grimacing once again in sympathy when Tim swore even louder as he approached his elbow. “Yeah, there’s definitely something going on here.” He paused, brow furrowing. “How did you say you landed on it?”

“I didn’t,” Tim said. He was trying his best to stay composed and not do anything as embarrassing as whine or *cry*, but his voice was still rough enough to make Bruce’s brows furrow in concern. “I was in the tree and the branch gave way and I landed on the branch which landed on my arm.”

Again, Bruce winced as if *he* were the one in pain. He plucked a few leaves and twigs out of Tim's hair. Then he suddenly cupped Tim's face, sighing as he met Tim's wide-eyed gaze. This time, the evident *what am I going to do with you* sigh – luckily not the annoyed one – was accompanied by a *look*, a look that Tim always thought made Bruce look much older than he was.

It also told Tim that he was a second away from a lecture, one he could see coming from a mile away as the man faced Tim more head-on. Tim forced himself not to let his shoulders rise to his ears, and was only successful because of the pain that shot through his arm at the act.

Bruce huffed, brushing more debris from Tim's shoulder. "I understand there will be a more appropriate time for me to bring up the fact that I specifically told you not to go near this tree—"

"Bruce—"

"—but I specifically told you *not to go near this tree*."

"Later?" Tim groaned when he felt the increasing pitter-patter of raindrops on his head, shuddering as a cold gust of wind ruffled his hair. "Please?"

Bruce sighed again (this man was offering up those left and right today), but finally yielded. "Okay," he said, not throwing away the chance to level Tim with a stern look. "But don't think you're off the hook, young man."

"Oh God," Tim managed to croak, swallowing past a sudden lump in his throat. "Never say those words ever again."

Because it sounded so *weird* coming from Bruce. Too paternal and not at all fitting the charming yet brooding *Brucie* persona that Tim had first been told about as a young boy.

But maybe also because it had been one of Jack's favorite lines back in the day.

Bruce's gaze flickered between Tim's face and the injury, probably mistaking Tim's sudden grimace as a sign of pain.

Then he started untying his tie.

Tim blinked. "Uh, Bruce? Watcha doing?"

Bruce swiftly pulled the loosened tie from his collar and draped it over Tim's neck, adjusting it so that the ends stopped at the same level on his chest. "An arm sling."

And sure, arm slings were great, and creating one using a *tie* was probably one of the coolest things Tim had witnessed in his entire life (if maybe a bit too extra). The thing that *wasn't* cool, however, was the *pain*.

Elevating his arm closer to his shoulder left Tim sweating and trembling, breathing through the pain through clenched teeth. The slightest nudge of Bruce's fingers sent a shock of suffering through Tim's bones, dull throbbing morphing into what felt like *stabbing*. The burning in Tim's eyes returned, and this time he wasn't able to stop the tears from rolling down his cheeks as the tie was secured around his arm.

Okay. Maybe his arm *was* broken. This *sucked*.

Bruce kept eerily quiet during the whole ordeal, only offering a hint of a grimace or a quiet apology when Tim groaned or swore loud enough. When he was done, he placed a hand on Tim's shoulder, the following squeeze much gentler than before, as if he was suddenly afraid that Tim would shatter under any more pressure.

And shit, maybe he wasn't entirely wrong. The hot tears were cooling on his face, his breath hitching every few seconds as another flash of pain tore through him. He was pretty sure his lower lip was wobbling. God, he felt like a complete *mess*.

Bruce tutted and brushed a few stray tears from Tim's cheeks. "I'm going to pick you up now."

Tim wasn't given the chance to object as Bruce gathered him up in his arms, sliding one arm under his knees and one by his shoulders, and stood up. Tim yelped and then groaned as the movement justled his arm, instinctively putting his good arm over Bruce's shoulder and twisting the material in a tight grip.

Bruce tutted again, and Tim was shocked at how similar to *Damian* it made him sound like. But instead of conveying a sense of annoyance or even disappointment at the sound, the only emotion that Tim was met with was one of *sympathy*. Luckily, he wasn't given the opportunity to have a mental breakdown over that – or the sudden realization of why the trademark crease between Damian's eyebrows had always felt so familiar. Not when his arm felt like someone was

crushing it with a sledgehammer with every step Bruce took.

“I’m too old to be carried like this,” he rasped, trying to distract Bruce from the fact that he was now actively crying into his shoulder. He’d never been more relieved that no one else was home.

“You’ll never be too old,” Bruce said. His chest vibrated against Tim’s cheek as he spoke. The forming stubble on Bruce’s chin brushed against his forehead. “I still carry Dick around when he’s feeling clingy.”

Tim huffed out a wet laugh. “Yeah, but he’s. You know. He’s *Dick*.”

The first child. The *perfect* child. The one Bruce had known the longest. The one who hadn’t elbowed himself into the family. The one Bruce had *picked*. The list went on and on.

Tim could *sense* the eyebrow raise. “Your point being?”

Tim rolled the fabric of the suit between his fingers. “You know, he’s your *actual*…” he began, but trailed off, suddenly exhausted. He didn’t have the energy to have *that* conversation any time soon. “I don’t know,” he settled for. “It’s nothing.”

The silence dragged on. The wind brushed through the trees, ruffling Tim’s hair. The rain had started to pick up, the sound of the soft pitter-patter increasing as the drops fell around them. But Tim could only focus on the way Bruce’s embrace was warm, on the way the arms had at some point tightened around him.

“I’ll save the lecture for later,” Bruce suddenly said, and Tim forced himself to listen. “But I don’t tell you *not* to do things because I’m *evil*. It’s so that you don’t—.”

“I told you, I was getting the damned cat,” Tim gritted out. He tried to keep his swearing to a minimum as another stab of pain shocked his nervous system.

Bruce’s voice was quiet and almost *pained* when he spoke. “Tim, you… you could’ve been seriously injured. And I wouldn’t even have known.”

Something heavy settled in Tim’s stomach. The guilt twisted like a knife in his chest.

“I know, B. I just—” Tim sighed, a tired yet frustrated sound. “It’s just

that Damian's been so *grumpy* lately and I *know* it's because of the stupid cat going missing and when he was suddenly *right there* I just had to get him and…"

Bruce's steps had slowed, the change in pace bringing Tim out of his rambling.

"You tried to catch him…for Damian?"

And Bruce sounded hesitant, almost *astonished*. As if instead of confessing that he'd attempted to do something *nice* for someone who was essentially his half-brother, Tim had told him Gotham didn't need the Bat anymore.

In all fairness, Tim understood the surprise. He himself had questioned his sanity all the way up to the top of the tree, more so than ever when he was already crawling out on the branch, an arm wrapped around it and the other one reaching toward the black and white cat.

But every time he so much as considered giving up and climbing back down, he kept seeing Damian's bitter – not sad, the gremlin didn't get *sad* – expression upon hearing about Alfred's disappearance. He thought about the way he'd on multiple occasions caught Damian sitting on the front steps at odd hours of the day, eyes alert and intently scanning the vicinity.

He'd only asked once and hadn't dared to again when he'd been told to mind his own business. Said, of course, in *Damian's* language, which involved a lot more insults than strictly necessary. But it hadn't been difficult to figure out what – or rather *whom* – he had been looking for.

And it had reminded Tim that Damian was, in fact, a kid. Annoying and overconfident and downright *hurtful* at times. But also a kid who missed his pet.

Tim noticed Bruce trying to catch a glimpse of Tim's face so he stubbornly turned his head more toward Bruce's shoulder, pressing his forehead against his collar. "I mean…not *no*," he mumbled against the soft material and was quick to add, "But defiantly not *yes*. It wasn't *just* for him. I…we *all* miss Alfred."

"Sure do, chum," Bruce said, and it almost sounded like he was smiling.

Tim fell quiet. He moved his head so that he could glimpse the large

tree over Bruce's shoulder, watching how the distance grew with every step. For a moment he contemplated whether he should let the conversation die out. He didn't really get to decide as they tumbled out of his mouth of their own volition.

"He's just…he's been through a lot, I guess."

Bruce inhaled, his chest expanding against Tim. Tim thought it was just a sound of agreement, a breath conveying a mutual sadness over a grim situation. And maybe it was partly that. But when Bruce spoke a few moments later, his voice was so warm and *fond* that it made Tim blink in surprise.

"I don't I think I say it *nearly* often as I ought to...but I'm so proud of you, chum."

Tim's grip on Bruce's suit tightened, suddenly dizzy in a way that made him worry that he was going to tumble out of Bruce's grip. Still, a pleasant warmth was spreading through his chest, Bruce's words ringing on repeat in his ears. His eyes burned again, and he tried to be subtle when he pressed his heating face harder against Bruce's shoulder.

There was the press of lips against the side of his head. It was like Bruce was *trying* to make him bawl like a child.

And Tim was probably wrinkling what could only be a multi-million dollar suit with how tightly he was holding on to it. Was probably staining it with the blood caked into his hair and the tears sliding down his face. Bruce's knees were probably coated with mud and grass.

But at that moment, as he pressed his cheek to Bruce's chest, rocked by the gentle swaying as Bruce slowly made his way back toward the Manor, he couldn't find it in himself to care. He probably would later.

But for now?

He was just happy to be with his dad.

And it wouldn't be until a few days later that Bruce would tell the tale of a young, raven-haired boy of seven years who'd climbed that same tree. He'd tell him how that little boy had laid in the grass with tear-stained cheeks and an aching leg until the sun had started to set, until strong arms had finally wrapped around him and carried him inside. He'd admit that it was the only time he'd seen his father cry.

But for now, Bruce's arms tightened around the boy in his arms, the echo of another man's comforting words ringing in his ears as he carried him inside, shutting the door behind him.

End Notes

Idk what this was?? But I wrote it in like two weeks which is a big deal for me so

⋆. (ノ◕ワ◕)ノ*✲゜*。⋆.

Also I have a headcanon (?) that the oak was planted by Bruce's grandad. Literally adds nothing to the story but it’s LORE so there u go :)

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!